consisted of an enormous pile of boiled rice on the top of which lay a greasy carcase of mutton, liberally besprinkled with oil and grated almonds. 264

At a signal from Sultan bin Saqr, the other nobles seated themselves around the floor on their haunches. A negro slave approached with a silver bowl, a tablet of soap and a ewer of warm water. We held our hands in the bowl, lathered them with soap and, when the slave had poured water over them, dried them with a small towel which he provided. Sheikh Sultan then tore a choice piece of mutton into pieces with his bare hands and placed morsels of it on our plates, an action which in Arabia is considered an honour and distinction.

The mutton was exceptionally greasy and fat and I had some difficulty in swallowing it. It tasted much more appetizing when dipped in a bowl of curry, or eaten with chipatti or one of the spiced dishes. The rice, although somewhat oily, was the best part of the meal, as it was richly sprinkled with almonds and raisins. There were numerous other side dishes, such as *fagar*, a kind of truffle, mushrooms in sauce, little puff-balls of batter filled with cream, figs and dates in sweet syrup, pink iced biscuits and cheese made with goats' milk. Since it was polite to make a hearty meal, we were obliged by courtesy to sample most of the dishes and to consume all the morsels which the sheikh kept putting on our plates. All around us the nobles were belching loudly and smacking their lips with gusto, and we were expected to do the same.

I could not restrain a smile when my mind suddenly slipped back to the memory of a very sedate dinner party I had attended in London a month previously. Yet, for all their noise and somewhat barbaric outward satisfaction, their manners were in their own fashion perfect; they held the food with their fingers with extreme delicacy, and were most expert in the art of rolling meat and rice into an oval wedge so that it slipped into the mouth with ease. They, in their turn, must have been amused at our clumsy efforts to emulate Arab manners, and I am sure that I dropped more rice on the precious Bokhara rug than went into my mouth.

At length the sheikh, with a final belch, rose to his feet, signifying that the meal was ended. Thoroughly gorged, we followed suit, and allowed the slave to wash the grease from our hands. Returning to the throne room, we were handed tiny gilt cups into which a slave poured black mocha coffee flavoured with cloves 264 272 576

2: O'Shea G-3 (1944-1945) 1947 MK4 Trucial Oman MK4

It is considered good manners to drink coffee noisily, indicating satisfaction, for coffee-drinking is a rite with the Arabs. Not less than three cups should be taken, after which one shakes the cup to signify that one requires no more; if this pantomime is not undergone, the slave will keep on filling up the cup until the pot is empty. Usually the arrival of the coffee pot is accepted as a sign that the visitor should shortly take his leave, but on this occasion it appeared that Sultan bin Saqr desired our company a little longer. The slave reappeared with a silver censer, which he proceeded to swing under our noses; the smoke of the burning frankincense filled our nostrils with its sweet fragrance and was most pleasant.

When eventually we took our departure, shaking hands with all the nobles in turn, the whole party trouped off to the gateway to see us into our car. The sheikh muttered a blessing: *'s'Alla maleikum'*, or 'Allah protect you', and we sped off into the night, feeling about as bloated as city Aldermen after a Lord Mayor's banquet. A short drive across the desert brought us to the Fort, where we found our guests awaiting us, and had to face the formidable prospect of another dinner. However, as it was an eventful occasion, we managed to face up to it and do justice to the admirable meal which Lambert and his cooks had produced. For once there was plenty to drink, bottles appearing like magic from beneath the table. The party was a very merry one, with a great deal of singing (particularly from the jovial Irish officer, Captain Pat. Tandy, who was to replace Bird as Political Officer), and a great many speeches, including a humorous one from Bob Allison, my predecessor.

After Allison's departure for Karachi, affairs on the station continued to run smoothly, except for the torrential rains which flooded the desert and held up our aircraft. It was almost a joke to me to visit Flying Control each morning and inquire when the runways would be fit to use. I could see for myself that only a flying-boat could have landed on them in their present state, but officially I had to obtain a verdict from the R.A.F. authorities and signal a statement to the stations *en route*. At length this got so monotonous that I despatched a message to the effect that the runways would not be serviceable for at least two weeks. Two days later a message came from Karachi: 'Can York land at Sharjah to-morrow?' When one realizes that, apart from the impossible condition of the airfield, a York aircraft requires a run of at least

transport; there is no flat desert, as at Sharjah, suitable for an air-field, and the mountain ranges are too close for safe flying.

In parenthesis, I learnt that shortly after the Sheikh of Sharjah had agreed to lease his land to the British for the purposes of an airfield, he was secretly murdered by a hired assassin, who crept into his palace while he slept, put his eyes out with a red-hot iron, and slit his throat. The present ruler of Sharjah, Sultan bin Saqr, never sleeps without an armed bodyguard outside his room, and it is whispered that he is waiting to avenge the murder of his father. He has little doubt who instigated the crime.

An old retainer of the Khan Sahib's, a wrinkled Arab with a henna-dyed beard, Ali bin Achmed, came to talk to us. He is employed as a seaman and looks after the petrol dhow on which the emergency stocks provided by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company are stored. He is a distinguished-looking old man, with a fund of stories which he related to us as the sun sank slowly behind the sandhills and the palm trees leant in ragged silhouette against the sapphire-tinted horizon.

The Khan Sahib closed the shutters, lighted a perfumed coil of anti-mosquito powder, and hung a kerosene lamp from a hook in the ceiling. A slave brought us dishes of rice, steamed lamb, curry balls, chipatties, *haloua*, fruit and turkish delight, and, feeling ravenous, we ate in silence, seated on Persian rugs with our legs tucked underneath us in Arab style.

After the third cup of clove-scented coffee, we sat in the dim light, smoking cigarettes, while Ali bin Achmed puffed away at his tiny pipeful of hashish. He told us wild stories of shipwrecks on the rocks, and of pirates who plundered the unfortunate vessels and held the passengers to ransom; of British gunboats which shelled the village in reprisal and clapped the headmen in gaol. Then he spoke of the wild men of the mountains, the Shi'hou tribe, who seldom left their dark caves in the hills, and who lived on fish, wild honey and dates. They never mixed with the lowland Arabs, were greatly feared on account of their wild appearance and cruel habits, and were believed to be in league with a djinn.

'There is gold and tin in the mountains,' said Ali, 'but men will not seek for it on account of these wild ones. A man would be rich who dared to climb those cruel slopes and search for the gleaming metal. But, praise be to Allah, it would be a foolhardy enterprise.'

The Shi'hou tribe is a very ancient one, according to Ali, and

had lunch, but it was not possible to decline the dishes placed before us. In the centre of the dining-mat was a huge bowl of rice and steamed sheep, very fat and oily; chipatties, truffles, curry, sheep's liver, and pastry puff balls filled with honey. The sheikh presented me with a large piece of fat with his own hands, and I felt sick before it had entered my mouth.

After the meal we again washed our hands and sat drinking out of little brass cups of bitter coffee. Cigarettes were produced and all smoked except the uncle from Baraimi. The conversation, as is customary during social calls, began with polite enquiries after one's health. Raschid then recounted some of his experiences in the hunting field, and sent his son to bring a pile of fine gazelle skins, trophies of the chase; one of especial beauty and fine marking he presented to me, together with a pair of horns. The wazir, Hussein, looked as though he were tired of the conversation, and produced a blackwood reed from the folds of his *abbas* and began to play a wistful little tune. Abdul bin Hamid sang in a high-pitched voice and we sat back on our cushions and listened. The tune was monotonous and without melody, but it had a weirdly fascinating rhythm.

The sheikh, whose tales of the hunt were thus rudely interrupted, grew restless; he belched aggressively and pulled at his beard. At length, losing all patience, he rose abruptly and signalled us to follow him through the courtyard. Hussein went on playing his melancholy tune, so we wandered through the fort with Raschid and his daughter. Scores of ragged children came into the courtyard to stare at us; they were nothing to do with the sheikh, unless they were children of his servants, and he took no notice of them. With his twinkling blue eyes, humorous mouth and hawk-like nose, he might have been an Eastern king, benevolent and wise, surrounded by his subjects. He had perfect teeth, stained at the edges by tobacco, and on his finely-shaped hand wore a large cornelian stone, engraved with an account of his descent. The Arabs do not as a rule have a crest or heraldic design, although some of the sheikhs display a badge, usually in the form of a crescent or sometimes a bird or lion which is engraved on seals and the backs of chairs.

Raschid on this occasion wore a very barbaric-looking turban of white and purple Kashmir wool and looked more like a pirate than ever. When we had seen over the fort, many of the rooms of which were completely bare, he conducted us to the stables

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Soldier, guide and statesman — but above all a connoisseur of the art of coffee-making. Good manners require that a guest sip down three cups of the bitter, black brew.